

SETON BELT BARN  
West side of Church Road,  
north of Central Avenue  
Mitchelleville  
Prince George's County  
Maryland

HABS NO. MD-981

HABE  
MD  
17-MITV,  
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS AND  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

SETON BELT BARN

HABS NO. MD-981

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3-

Location: West side of Church Road, north of Central avenue, on dirt lane, Mitchellville, Prince George's County, Maryland

Present Use: The barn is being used by a tenant farmer, but is inadequately maintained.

Significance: The Seton Belt Barn is a unique, decorative example of a late 19th-century multi-use barn. The venture of a wealthy planter, William Seton Belt, the barn exhibits decorative features of Victorian-era architecture such as the jerkinhead roof, cupolas, and use of board-and-batten siding. It was part of the large landholdings of the Belt family, who retained possession of this tract from the 1860s until 1959. The Belts built two barns of this type during the same time period, one here at the home farm and the other nearby at Belmont.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Based on the Victorian-era design influence, the barn was built during the 1880s.
2. Original and subsequent owners: This property has been in the same family (Lee-Belt) since 1860, when it was purchased by Dr. Benjamin Lee. Following the death of the last heir in 1959, the property has been held in trust, and currently, a developer holds a purchase contract.
3. Alterations, additions: Additional framing has been installed in more recent years for the hanging of tobacco, particularly in the loft area.

B. Historical Context:

The Belt family had extensive landholdings in this area during the 19th century, including five separate farms. This was the home farm and one of two sites of this unusual, ornamented multi-use barn. The Victorian trim, board-and-batten siding (in pass-through area), louvered window openings and attention to such details as the

stairway, paint color, and cupolas, make it an unusually elaborate barn. It is also unique in its function, serving as a combination hay barn, stable and corn crib. No other barns like these are known to exist in the county.

During the early-19th century this land, known as the Oatlands, belonged to the Calvert family. It was sold to Dr. Benjamin Lee in 1860 (Deed CSM #3:635). Sometime after this purchase, Lee's daughter, Eleanor, and her husband, Dr. William Seton Belt, built a house here and began farming. Dr. Belt died in 1870 at which point the property passed on to Mrs. Belt and her sons. William Seton Belt, Jr., the last heir, passed away in 1959, leaving the property to the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, D.C., with the intent that the family mansion be used as a home for retired Episcopal priests (Will WDA #5:99, Estate file #13188).

Since that time, however, the home and other outbuildings have been destroyed by vandals. The barn now stands alone in cultivated fields, set at a distance from the main road. The fields are planted by a tenant farmer who has adapted the structure for use as a tobacco barn, adding the framework necessary for hanging tobacco to dry. Although in use, the barn is slowly deteriorating. The property is under a purchase contract with a local developer, and the future of the barn is uncertain.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: It is unique in its multi-use design, and in its finish details which are unusually elaborate for barn construction. It is a large rectangular structure with a central pass-through aisle approximately 14' wide. The lower level consists of livestock stalls and tack rooms on the east side, and storage rooms and a corn crib on the west side. The upstairs is divided into two large loft areas with a shaft in the east end. Its elaborate, Victorian-era finish details include louvered windows and cupolas, board-and-batten walls in pass-through area, a dog-leg stairway, and jerkinhead roof.

2. Condition of fabric: The barn is in fair condition. Despite needed repairs, it appears to be structurally sound.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The barn is two stories high, six bays long and two bays wide, measuring approximately 80' x 40'.

2. Foundations: The barn has a brick foundation, except under the corn crib area at the west end where it rests on brick piers (obviously for ventilation).

3. Walls: The exterior is covered with circular-sawn vertical boards. There is evidence in the eaves that the walls were once painted a creamy-white or beige color. The walls in the pass-through area are board and batten (with molded battens). The walls of the west end corn crib section are of vertical slats, necessary for the ventilation of drying corn.

4. Structural systems, framing: The barn is of wood-frame construction with hewn and pegged main posts and diagonal braces, and circular sawn and nailed intermediate posts. Because of the needless location of mortise joints in some areas, the interior framework appears to be a mix of re-used and new materials. Some additional framework was added in recent years so that the barn could be used for drying tobacco.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: There are a number of doorways, all with plain board surrounds. The two largest doorways are those opening into the pass-through aisle. They have the remains of double, vertical-board doors hung with large strap hinges. Over each of these doors, in the second story, are doors accessing the hay loft. These are heavy doors of vertical boards on the exterior, and horizontal boards on the interior. They are held by numerous nails, neatly aligned, and hung with strap hinges. Other doorways, with the same doors, appear at the south elevation--three to the east of the pass-through, and one to the west.

b. Windows: The windows all have plain board surrounds and are louvered. The only exceptions appear in the pass-through aisle where there are small louvered windows with simple shouldered-architrave trim. There is evidence on some of robin's egg blue paint. In the gable ends are louvered bull's eye windows.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The barn has a low-pitched jerkinhead roof covered with raised-seam metal, painted red.
- b. Cornice, eaves: The barn has a return boxed cornice with projecting eaves. There is a plain cornice board with no ornamentation.
- c. Cupolas: There are two cupolas, evenly spaced along the roof ridge. They are louvered on all sides, and have pyramidal roofs with broad overhanging eaves ornamented with quatrefoil trim.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

a. First floor: To the center of the barn is a pass-through aisle which separates the first floor of the barn into two separate sections (with separate functions). The east end consists of three tack/storage rooms across the front with a stable area to the rear. The stable area is bisected by an elevated, narrow plank walk with dirt-floor stalls to either side. At one end of the walk is the rear doorway, and at the other, is a ladder to a hay shaft in the loft above. At the west end of the barn, to the inside, are two storage rooms, back to back. In the northeast corner, open to the pass-through area, is the dog-leg stairway. At the far west end, running front to rear, is the corn crib.

b. Second floor: There is a small second-floor stairhall which opens into a large open-space hay loft to the east side. There is a large, square opening in the floor to the pass-through below. Near the center of the loft, a partially enclosed shaft runs from an opening in the floor (to the stalls) up to the cupola. At the west wall, behind the stairhall, is a doorway into another large open room.

2. Stairway: There is a partially enclosed dog-leg stairway at the northeast corner of the pass-through aisle. There is a one-step landing at the base of the stair, which then turns and runs along the wall to a landing, and continues up in the opposite direction. The

walls of the exposed stairway--like the outside walls--are covered with board-and-batten siding.

3. Flooring: There is random width, rough-cut wooden flooring throughout, except in the stall area where there is a dirt floor.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls and ceilings are unfinished, exposing the framing of the barn.

5. Openings:

a. Doorways and doors: The doorways all are framed with plain boards (end-joined rather than mitered).

b. Windows: All have plain board framing (like the doorways), with louvers.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The barn is located at a crook in a dirt lane, some distance from the main roadway. Its east side faces the roadway. The barn itself faces north. The area surrounding the barn is now overgrown.

2. Historic landscape design: The barn sits to the southwest of the site of "Oatlands," the former home of William Seton Belt and family, which was destroyed by vandalism in the 1960s. The barn is all that remains of this once lovely homestead.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Primary and unpublished sources:

Pearl, Susan G. "Maryland Historical Trust, State Historic Sites Inventory Form, Seton Belt Barn," prepared June 1988.

B. Secondary and published sources:

Virta, Alan. Prince George's County, A Pictorial History (Prince George's County, Maryland: Donning Company Publishers, 1984).

Watson, James D. Prince George's County, Past and Present (Washington, D.C.: Federal Lithograph Company, 1960).

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of the Seton Belt Barn was undertaken as part of a cooperative agreement between the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) and the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission on behalf of the Prince George's County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to document select sites throughout the county. A memorandum of agreement was signed in August of 1988 and the project, to span one year, was begun in January of 1989. HPC staff persons, Gail Rothrock, director and Susan G. Pearl, research historian made the selection of sites. They also provided access to their historical research on file at the HPC, as well as their extensive knowledge of county history. The large format photography was undertaken by HABS photographer, Jack E. Boucher. The historical reports were prepared by HABS historian, Catherine C. Lavoie who also accompanied the photographer into the field for on site investigation.